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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a sample of the materials available on conflict from four different academic disciplines (psychology, social psychology, sociology, and communications). The author describes sample research dealing with intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict, as well as intragroup conflict and intergroup conflict. She emphasizes that conflict is a broad, all-encompassing term that has a multitude of applications in the schools. She maintains that conflict is not only a necessary prerequisite for constructive change in education, but that it is also the raw material of school administration. (DS)

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL:

A CRITIQUE OF RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

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Let me begin by presenting three modest proposals about the nature of conflict in the schools. These proposals are implicit in much of the literature on conflict in education, and they may seem quite obvious to you. But I believe they deserve attention.

I. Conflict is a very broad, all-encompassing term.

Think of the ways in which we use the word, conflict. It applies to everything from international tensions and war to deciding whether or not we'll break our diet and have that piece of cheese cake. We speak of conflict of interests, conflict between people, conflicting moralities, conflicting schedules, and so forth. And the term certainly has a multitude of applications in school administration, as you all know.

II. Conflict is the raw material of school administration.

I hardly need to tell you that conflict is a staple--a constant--in the working lives of elementary principals. You all could devise lengthy lists of conflict situations that you encounter daily. Potential conflict involves students, teachers, parents, the non-teaching staff, the central office, and, of course, you, the principal.

Several of the elementary principals I've had the pleasure of speaking with recently have shown me that almost everything they do in the administration of their schools involves the managing of some type of conflict. Barbara Keirnes, principal of Edgewood Elementary School in Eugene, pointed out that conflict--how to handle it and how to put it to constructive use--is an integral part of her whole philosophy of educational management. I'm sure that many of you would agree with her that effective school administration and successful conflict management are inseparable. Herman Schwartzrock, principal of Condon Elementary in Eugene, put it slightly differently: "If it wasn't for conflict, I'd be out of a job." I think this statement must apply to all principals, as well as to all administrators.

If it weren't for conflict, there would be very little for you to manage, and certainly your careers as school administrators would be less interesting and challenging, although I'm sure that there are times when you all could do with a little less challenge.

III. Conflict is desirable and necessary for growth and change in education.

When we see the integral part that conflict plays in school administration, we can come to think of conflict not just as a necessary evil to be eliminated at all cost, but rather, as a potentially positive force to be managed and to be used for the betterment of the school. As Mrs. Keirnes said to me, conflict will inevitably produce change, and change will inevitably produce conflict. Avoidance of conflict necessitates avoidance of change, and all of you, I'm sure, are well apprised of the need for constructive change in education today.

The view that change and conflict are bound together is implicit in much of the literature on conflict in education. There has been, across the last 15 years or so, a real change in the assumptions about conflict made by researchers and writers. Conflict used to be regarded by theorists and practitioners alike as an aberration. Conflict was seen as a departure from the norm, and the 'norm' was defined in rather ideal terms—i.e., as peaceful cooperation. Any deviation from peaceful cooperation was regarded as evil. The role of the good administrator was, therefore, to eliminate conflict as soon as it reared its ugly head. The administrator was supposed to keep things moving smoothly (at least on the surface). He or she was charged with resolving (as opposed to managing) conflict, since the only good conflict was a dead conflict.

It became increasingly obvious that this version of organizational conflict failed to adequately describe what actually goes on in the schools.

Theorists (and some practitioners) began to devise a much more dynamic and constructive view of conflict. This new view holds that not only is conflict ongoing and inevitable, but it is a vital sign of life in any organization. To stifle conflict is to squelch the vitality and the capacity for growth and change essential in education today. Writers and researchers thus did a rather radical about face and came to regard conflict, rather than peaceful cooperation, as the norm. The role of the school administrator was redefined as well. Instead of striving to resolve and eliminate all conflict, he or she could properly be concerned with managing and maintaining conflict for constructive purposes.

Now, I know that this may sound fine in theory. But some of you are perhaps thinking that this view of conflict wouldn't be very practical. It is, I think, very hard for us to change our thinking about conflict, given the cultural values and expectations with which we've all been raised. Many of us desire to avoid conflict, especially confrontation with our fellow workers with whom we have constant, daily contact. But as one principal said to me, "You can't ultimately avoid conflict anyway. It's better to get it out into the open and let everyone involved deal with it directly. This is a constructive process."

Let me just briefly reiterate my three modest proposals. First, conflict is a very broad, all-encompassing term that certainly has many applications in the elementary school setting. Second, conflict is the raw material of school administration. And third, conflict is desirable and necessary for growth and change in education.

Now, because it is such a broad term that applies to such a wide variety of situations, conflict is studied in a variety of academic disciplines, each of which deals with different (though interrelated) levels of conflict. Let me briefly run through the four main levels of conflict and give you

an idea of who studies what.

First is intrapersonal conflict--conflict within ourselves that we all experience, for example, when we're trying to decide whether or not to have a piece of cheese cake. Of course, intrapersonal conflict involves much more serious decisions, as well as the conflicting ways in which we perceive the world and the people around us. Intrapersonal conflict is studied by psychologists, who, in addition to being concerned with decision making and perception, also examine the roles of hostility and aggression, threat and anxiety, and subjectivity and judgment in intrapersonal conflict.

The second level of conflict is interpersonal conflict--conflict between individuals. All of you, I'm sure, can recall personality clashes in your school. For example, one teacher simply doesn't like another for a variety of reasons. Perhaps one is conservative and traditional, while the other is liberal and easy-going. They disagree over educational philosophy as much as they disagree over, say, style of dress. And you, as principal and conflict manager, must mediate between these two conflicting parties. Psychologists and social psychologists study interpersonal conflict and can give you some suggestions on how to manage conflict among the individuals in your school.

The third level of conflict is intragroup conflict--conflict among members of groups--usually relatively small groups in elementary schools. This level of conflict is very familiar to all of you. As principals, you find yourselves managing intragroup conflicts among your teachers, among your schools' support staff members, among members of parents' advisory councils.

Communication plays an important role in such intragroup conflicts. As you know, failure to effectively communicate frequently prevents the real issues and points of contention from emerging in small groups.

And, as you also know, a group leader can't skillfully direct the group decision making process unless the members understand each other's positions on the issues. Social psychologists, sociologists, and communications specialists deal with the dynamics of small group conflict. Later on, I will give you a sample of the research being done on communication and consensus-reaching in small groups, which might be of special interest to those of you who try to encourage participative decision making.

The fourth level of conflict is, logically, intergroup conflict—conflict among groups. Intergroup conflict in the elementary school is usually on a fairly small scale, since relatively few people are involved. But this level also encompasses conflict among much larger groups, such as national political organizations and special interests.

Within your school you may have encountered conflicts between the teachers and the non-teaching staff, or between the parents' advisory council and the teachers. Your school as a whole can also function as a group and can come into conflict with groups outside the school, such as the central office or the school board over, say, allocation of resources. Intergroup communication is, of course, important, and communications specialists study intergroup conflict, as do sociologists. Political scientists are concerned with intergroup conflict on a larger scale, and, naturally, focus on the political aspects of such conflict.

As you can probably guess, all four levels of conflict are interrelated, and conflict on different levels frequently functions simultaneously.

By way of example, let's suppose that you are a principal facing an imminent teachers' strike in your school. You will most likely experience conflict on all four levels.

First, you probably will tend to be both somewhat in sympathy with your teachers (perhaps you were once a teacher yourself, and maybe you

were a member of the union), while at the same time, you might well be opposed to the teachers' proposed strike (after all, you are charged with keeping the school in functioning order, and that's hard to do without teachers). This conflict of loyalties—a type of role conflict—is an intrapersonal conflict, and perhaps a very painful one.

Now, suppose that you feel that the union's building representative is neglecting his or her teaching duties by spending time organizing the strike. Perhaps you feel that this person doesn't have the students' best interests at heart. The building rep, on the other hand, may well think that you, the principal, are too demanding and that you fail to understand the teachers' needs. Here lies the makings of interpersonal conflict.

Let's further suppose that some of your teachers fervently support the union and plan to go out on strike as soon as possible. Other teachers oppose the union and have refused to strike. And there are those teachers caught in the middle between the proponents and the opponents. Perhaps they support the union's demands, but they don't believe that a strike is necessary. Almost any principal who has been threatened with a strike can tell you that the intragroup tensions among teachers can be devastating. Although it's often extremely difficult, the principal must try to manage such intragroup conflict. After all, when the strike is over, everyone will have to return to working together.

Now, the most obvious intergroup conflict in a situation like the one I've been outlining is the conflict between the teachers' union and the board of education. Collective bargaining is in essence a kind of organized, structured intergroup conflict designed (in theory at least) to lead to a constructive compromise of conflicting interests. There are those who say that "a constructive compromise of conflicting interests"

really means that no one party gets everything it wants. But the collective bargaining process is one way of structuring intergroup conflict--a way of formalizing adversary proceedings among groups.

Of course, not all conflict situations are as highly emotional or as potentially destructive as an imminent strike. But I hope that this example has given you an idea of how the four levels of conflict can operate simultaneously. Conflict in the schools can be immensely complex--as complex as human nature itself.

I'd like to briefly give you a sample of research on each of the four levels of conflict. But first, let me explain why I think conflict research can be of value to you as school principals. The research and literature on conflict can give you a theoretical basis. It can give you a conceptual framework for analyzing the fragmentary and often puzzling conflicts that you experience in day-to-day school administration.

As one elementary principal explained to me, the research offers what she calls "organizers." "Organizers" are terms which she uses to order her experiences and perceptions of conflict--to make sense of them, in other words. We all make sense of our experiences (including our experiences with conflict) by describing, categorizing, and relating them to each other. This process of analysis, however informal it may be, is a prerequisite to meaningful action. And the research and literature on conflict can help you in this analytic process, even though it can't offer you simple formulas for resolving conflicts.

Now, let's turn to the research and begin with intrapersonal conflict and psychology. Inconsistent and conflicting perceptions are a major source of intrapersonal conflict. Our perceptions--our point of view--determines how we define issues, as well as how we act. And because

we all find it hard to tolerate ambiguity, we all try to adjust our perceptions so that they're consistent.

Don Essig, principal of Howard Elementary in Eugene, pointed out to me that low tolerance for ambiguity and the desire for consistency frequently contribute to conflicts in his school. In order to increase his staff's ability to tolerate ambiguity in their own perceptions, and to increase their tolerance for others' viewpoints, he has staff members participate in perception exercises. For example, staff members will all read and interpret the same story, and then compare their interpretations. The story is written to be "deliberately vague" in spots; it is subject to different interpretations. The differences in the readers' perceptions can be striking. But each individual's version is internally consistent. The individual readers eliminate any potentially conflicting details in their quest for consistency. Psychologists call this process selective perception. We choose to pay attention to information that is consistent with our views of reality, and we ignore information that is inconsistent with those views. For example, a teacher favoring behavior modification techniques will find ample evidence to support his or her position and will tend to ignore evidence critical of such techniques. But a teacher opposed to behavior mod will pay close attention to criticism and will tend to ignore evidence supporting it.

The process of selective perception affects how we remember things as well. The psychologists' term for this is selective recall. We tend to forget things from the past that aren't consistent with our current perceptions and set of assumptions.

Selective perception also shapes our future expectations. We expect to find the future compatible with our present perceptions. Psychologists call this perceptual constancy.

10

These three principals of perception (selective perception, selective recall, and perceptual constancy) seem quite obvious if we stop to think about it. But these processes aren't always so obvious to ourselves or others in daily living. We usually are not even consciously aware of seeking consistency in our perceptions of past, present, and future. Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that these processes are in operation. We are all engaged in resolving conflicts in perception, and we all seek consistency, even if it is the hobgoblin of little minds.

One well-known psychologist, Leon Festinger, used the principal of selective perception in developing his theory of cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger, our perceptions consist of what he calls "cognitive elements." These cognitive elements may or may not be consistent with each other. Since people have low tolerance for ambiguity, they seek to rearrange cognitive elements, eliminating some while emphasizing others, to achieve consistency. This process Festinger calls resolving dissonance.

By way of example, let's suppose that there is one member of the parents' advisory council who seems particularly cantankerous. In spite of your best efforts to cooperate with him, this person always opposes your suggestions in a very abrasive, argumentative way. In other words, this council member seemingly has done everything to insult you and make your relations with the rest of the council quite miserable. Naturally, you will have negative feelings about this person; anyone in your position would.

Now, let's further suppose that this council member has, quite out of the blue, so you think, nominated you for the Administrator of the Year Award. You of course would be surprised and somewhat confused. In Festinger's terms, you would experience dissonance in your perceptions of (and feelings about) the council member. And to resolve this dissonance,

you will go about rearranging cognitive elements. In other words, you will start the process of seeking consistency.

You can resolve dissonance in this case in one of two ways. First, you can conclude that your opponent has something up his sleeve and that his seemingly conciliatory move is really a guise for further treachery. Taking this course means reinforcing your original negative perceptions and eliminating the inconsistent, positive perceptions. Or, second, you can change your original negative opinion of the council member and begin to see him in more friendly, positive terms. Taking this second course means that you will accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative, so to speak. But whichever choice you make, you will be adjusting your perceptions to achieve consistency. You will be resolving dissonance and managing intrapersonal conflict.

Ross Stagner, a psychologist who has examined Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, believes that the dynamics of resolving dissonance can be put to constructive use in at least some interpersonal conflict situations. Stagner suggests that the introduction of dissonance can help to break up an original negative image, can open the way for the creation of a more positive, constructive view, and thus can lessen the chances of conflict. Stagner implies that we can perhaps inspire more positive attitudes in our opponents by introducing dissonance into their perceptions of us. In other words, if we start behaving toward them in a more positive (and, therefore, inconsistent) manner, our opponents may decide that maybe we aren't such bad guys after all.

Psychologists like Festinger tell us about intrapersonal conflicts. And, as Stagner suggests, conflicts within ourselves obviously have an effect on the people around us. For example, almost all of you, I imagine, have tried at one time or another to help out a staff member who is having trouble at home. In many such cases, intrapersonal conflict directly affects interpersonal conflict. Social psychologists study the relationship between the individual and society, including the relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict.

Dean Tjosvold, a social psychologist, examined the function of "social face" in interpersonal conflict situations. We are all acquainted with this concept. Social face is essentially the self-esteem and self-respect that we derive from the reactions of others. If other people respond positively to us, we tend to feel good about ourselves. On the other hand, if others, especially those whom we respect, give us negative feedback, our self-esteem may fall. We will suffer a loss of social face.

Tjosvold experimentally examined interpersonal conflict situations that involved negotiation between two individuals. One person was placed in a high power position. In other words, he had resources that the second person did not have, but wanted. This second individual therefore assumed a low power position. His task was to get what he wanted from the high power person through negotiation.

You all have probably found yourselves in such situations as the one set up by Tjosvold. To a student sent to you for discipline, you, the principal, assume the high power position. You hold all the cards, as far as the student is concerned. But if you are seeking more money from the school board for your school's library, you are the one to assume the low power position. In this case, the board holds all the cards--and all the resources which you need.

In Tjosvold's experiment, the subjects were assigned high power positions, while Tjosvold's confederates assumed low power positions. The confederates' task was to gain concessions from the subjects in one of three ways:

1. By affronting the social face of the high power subjects (in other words, by behaving in a threatening or insulting manner);

2. By strongly affirming the subjects' social face (in other words, by emphatically reinforcing the subjects' self-esteem); and

3. By simply maintaining the subjects' social face (neither insulting them nor offering them strong reinforcement).

As all of you would predict, the first method, affronting the subjects' social face, didn't work. Under these conditions, the likelihood of agreement diminished, and the subjects developed strongly competitive, resistant attitudes. Common sense tells us this much. None of you would deliberately set out to insult the school board members if you were seeking additional funds for your school library.

The second method, strong affirmation of social face, didn't work either. This result is somewhat surprising, since we might suspect that strong positive reinforcement would lead to both good feelings and cooperation. In fact, strongly affirming the subjects' social face did succeed in making the subjects respond positively to the low power confederates. But when it came to making negotiation concessions and sharing the resources with the low power bargainers, the high power subjects wouldn't play ball.

The third method, simply maintaining the subjects' social face, did work to the advantage of the low power bargainers. This middle course between insult and ingratiation proved successful in all of Tjosvold's experiments in this area. Resources were equitably redistributed, and both parties were satisfied with the outcome. And interpersonal conflict was successfully managed.

Now, what do these results mean to you as elementary school principals? You all at one time or another find yourselves in decision making situations that necessitate negotiation with another person. You're all acquainted with the give-and-take, with the art of compromise, so essential to making things work smoothly. What Tjosvold's research tells you is that the best way to get what you want is to concentrate on accomplishing definite goals, without resorting either to insult on the one hand, or ingratiation on the other.

Suppose that you have occasion to speak with a school board member about your school's need for additional funds for the library. According to Tjosvold's research (and according to common sense as well), you will be most likely to win the board member's support if you simply present your <u>case</u> as convincingly as you can. It goes without saying that if you call the board member an unregenerate mossback if he refuses to support your request, then you won't gain his cooperation. On the other hand, if you lavish praise upon him, calling him the most enlightened and wise of board members, you won't get what you want either.

Tjosvold points out that our society places high value on unyieldingness and resistance as signs of strength. But his research shows that instead of defensive resistance, people bargaining over limited resources should be more concerned with results--with the quality of the final agreement. Let me summarize the implications of Tjosvold's research: You won't accomplish what you desire if your ego is constantly and obviously on the line in an interpersonal conflict or bargaining situation. Hypersensitivity to either criticism or praise does not make for a satisfying outcome to interpersonal conflict.

Now, let's turn to intragroup conflict and communications research. Communication research is appealing, I think, because it focuses on the processes of interaction and conflict, rather than on the characteristics of the participants (such as their age, sex, or personality factors). Communication specialists, such as Donald Ellis and Aubrey Fisher, study the communication patterns of small groups engaged in decision making. They maintain that conflict is an integral part of intragroup communication and decision making. And they believe that the progression of conflict and the achievement of consensus are the most important things to examine. Ellis and Fisher incorporated these assumptions into their research on conflict in small group development.

To discover the role of conflict in small group interaction, these two researchers recorded the entire history of four experimental groups engaged in decision making. The participants in these groups came from a variety of backgrounds and differed in age and sex. The four groups were allowed to meet for as long as necessary (and on different days, if they preferred). One group reached consensus in three hours; another took seven hours, and met on four different days. Ellis and Fisher tried to keep things natural, allowing the groups to choose their own policy questions for debate, and giving them no instructions except to reach consensus.

Their examination revealed three phases of group interaction: First, the interpersonal conflict phase; second, the confrontation stage, and third, the substantive conflict stage. There are no clear, formal boundaries between these three phases, but the end result is the achievement of consensus.

During the first stage, the interpersonal conflict phase, intragroup conflict results from individual differences of opinion and perception.

Let's suppose that you are the leader of a textbook selection committee composed of teachers and parents. These people come from different backgrounds and hold varying opinions about education. You may logically expect conflict to arise, for example, between the committee member who belongs to the John Birch Society and the liberal committee member whose hero is Herb Kohl. But differences between other members as well can easily arise, since textbook selection frequently evokes strong feelings. Opinions clash over the nature of education, the proper materials for elementary students to study, the values presented in text materials, and so forth.

What can you, as group leader, do to move your committee beyond this interpersonal conflict phase toward consensus reaching? According to Ellis and Fisher's research, you can direct the course of conflict away from personal grievances and toward consideration of issues directly related to textbook selection. At the same time, you can assist the committee members to form feelings of group cohesion.

Suppose that the committee's John Bircher starts expounding on the moral laxity of today's youth, while the committee's resident liberal starts condemning the conservative backlash in education. While both of these topics are perhaps interesting, and while they are vaguely related to textbook selection, discussing them won't help the committee do its job or reach consensus. Ellis and Fisher suggest that when irrelevancies of an inflammatory nature arise, the group leader should simply change the subject. You can tell your two sparring committee members that you find their observations interesting. Then you can start talking about the content of different textbooks, for example. You will not have affronted anyone's social face. But you will have begun to subtly shift the group's

attention away from personal differences over largely irrelevant issues back to the committee's task.

This shift characterizes Ellis and Fisher's second phase of intragroup conflict—the confrontation stage. It is here that feelings of group cohesion begin to take precedence over individual differences. During this second stage, the group becomes polarized. Informal coalitions have formed, and philosophical differences are clearly defined.

In our hypothetical committee, you, the leader, might expect the group members to polarize into two factions, one rallying behind the conservative member, and the other supporting the liberal member. However, in addition to taking sides, group members will also begin to seek information during the confrontation stage. But they won't put it to really good use until the final substantive conflict phase.

The importance of information characterizes the third phase of intragroup conflict--the substantive conflict stage. During this stage, group-generated issues finally take precedence over individual biases and preferences. The group starts dealing with specifics and begins to move away from simple generalities. Ellis and Fisher found that ambiguous statements increased during this final confrontation stage. This increased incidence of ambiguity indicates that group members are changing their attitudes and that they are more aware of the complexities of the issues.

You, as committee leader, can facilitate the decision making process during this final stage by presenting relevant information. It is here that the leader can introduce relevant statistics on textbook use, information on textbook effectiveness in relation to curricular goals, and costs of materials, for example. The committee members will be more receptive to such facts and figures now that they're dealing with specifics.

Ellis and Fisher point out that even after the group achieves consensus and makes a final decision, dissent will still remain. In other words, not everybody will be completely satisfied with the outcome. But, as you all know, this is almost always the case with any group-made decision.

Now, let's change our focus and look at the fourth level of conflict--intergroup conflict--from a broader, community-wide perspective. Community conflict frequently involves the schools, as you know. The schools and the educators who run them are highly visible in the community, especially in times of controversy. In contested budget elections (such as the recent ones in Oregon), in controversies over textbooks (such as the tragic conflict in Kanawha County, West Virginia), the schools can become the focal point for community frustrations and hostility.

And because of your position as a principal, community members tend to regard you as one member of a rather large, vaguely defined group, which they might call The Schools or The School District. You, of course, are aware that it is overly simple, and in fact, inaccurate, to lump together into one group everyone who has anything to do with public education. But the fact is that many citizens see public education as monolithic. They assume that you, a building principal, have knowledge of, and control over, things that you couldn't possibly control, such as the school budget, for example. But because you are accessible and have direct contact with students and parents, and because you <u>are</u> an administrator, people see you as a very obvious representative of that amorphous organization, which they call The Schools.

For example, one principal in Eugene, Herman Schwartzrock, told me that parents and community members have been calling him to register their opinions and complaints about the school lunch issue. Now, the Eugene

School District 4J recently considered contracting a private firm to provide school lunches. There has been a fair amount of controversy over the nutritional value of present school lunches, over budgetary considerations, and so forth. But the final decision in this matter lies with the school board. Obviously, the school principals will not be the ones to make such a policy decision. But the people who call Mr. Schwartzrock don't quite see it that way. They see him as a member of a monolithic group--the schools--and they assume that, as a member of this group, he can directly influence policy making, even if he doesn't make the decisions himself.

This tendency to see everyone affiliated with public education, from the janitors to the superintendent, as members of a unified group is exaggerated during community conflict involving the schools. This tendency is part of the process of polarization that occurs as intergroup conflict escalates.

James Coleman, an eminent sociologist, studied community conflicts--intergroup conflicts, including those involving the schools. And he incorporated the phenomenon of polarization into his theory of community conflict, which I'd like to briefly summarize for you.

According to Coleman, the major factor determining the intensity of the conflict, as well as indicating its final outcome, is the history of conflict in the community. If the community has a history of relatively peaceful conflict resolution, then the prognosis for the outcome of the current conflict is fairly good. However, if there is a strong residue of antagonism left over from past and unsatisfactorily resolved conflicts, then already-existing cleavages can become even wider with the advent of a new controversy.

In Kanawha County, West Virginia, for example, potentially destructive tensions in the community had existed long before the textbook issue arose.

Basic economic inequities, as well as conflicting cultural and religious values, had plagued Kanawha for years prior to the eruption of the textbook controversy.

Coleman classes events precipitating community conflict into three general areas:

1. Economic events. Controversies over school budgets would fit here.

2. Events centering around local power or authority. Controversy over court ordered busing plans can be classified here. Communities such as South Boston frequently view the federal government's role in school desegregation as interference with local community control of the schools.

3. Events touching on cultural values and belief systems. The Kanawha textbook controversy fits in this area.

The events in these three areas provide the immediate subject matter for conflict. And the most common <u>form</u> that conflict over precipitating events initially takes is what Coleman calls <u>revolt against the administration</u>. A few activists who continually oppose the existing leadership in the community provide the catalyst for controversy. Another minority is committed to supporting the administration. But during this early stage, the majority of community residents remains generally apathetic, neither supporting nor opposing administration policies. The majority becomes involved, however, as the battle escalates.

In a school budget controversy, for example, an ad hoc committee of Citizens Against Higher Taxes might act as a catalyst to conflict by attacking the proposed school budget and the school board. The PTA, or the local education association might defend the budget and support the school board.

Now, here we have the makings of polarization between the anti-budget forces and the pro-budget forces. Coleman states that as the conflict

escalates, this process of polarization "tends to alter the social geography of the community." In extreme cases, people choose their friends and associates according to which side they're on. It's interesting, I think, that one of the best known folk songs of the labor movement, with the title, "Which Side Are You On?", sprung from the bloody conflict over unionization in Harlan County, Kentucky, in the 1930s. Of course, not all community conflict is as violent as that in Harlan County. But the dynamics of polarization are the same.

What can be done to reduce the kind of destructive community conflict that Coleman outlines? And what can you, as school principals, do to help head off intergroup confrontation in your community?

Coleman's theory suggests that the administration (including principals) can provide official channels for dissent from the community. As you all know, a dissatisfied minority that has no official, formal means of expressing dissatisfaction will do so unofficially and can cause greater disruption.

Providing official channels for dissent can further the process of co-optation. Co-optation is defined by Coleman as "the technique of bringing the opposition inside to voice its criticism." Co-optation serves as a kind of safety valve, allowing for the expression (and hence, reduction) of hostilities. Citizens' advisory councils at the district level, and, at the building level, parents' advisory councils, provide one means for community members to express their opinions and objections. Coleman's research suggests that organizations like these can have an ameliorative effect during community conflict involving the schools.

His research also suggests that prestigious community members (including school principals) should refuse to participate in the mudslinging and

further polarization of the community. Others in the community (parents, teachers, etc.) in part take their cues from you. And if you maintain your equanimity, you may inspire others to do likewise.

You can help to ameliorate conflict even if you have no final say over district policy decisions. When Mr. Schwartzrock, whom I mentioned earlier, or any of you, take the time to listen and respond to the people who call you to complain, you are furthering the process of co-optation, first of all. Second, you're helping to reduce polarization by showing your callers that you are basically a good, decent person, just like they are. And third, you are helping to keep intergroup community conflict within manageable bounds.

Now, I have taken you on what amounts to a Cook's Tour of the research and literature on conflict. And I've given you only a sample of the materials available on this broad topic. All of the materials I've summarized here are listed in the bibliography, which I hope you will pick up after this session.

There are other approaches to conflict that I haven't covered here, such as game theory, management systems theory, and simulation. Some of the other entries in the bibliography cover these topics.

As I mentioned above, simple formulas for resolving conflict in the schools don't exist. The research can help you to analyze conflicts. It can even, in some areas, indicate what directions you should take to successfully manage conflicts.

But ultimately, I think, the final answers must come from you. You are the ones most qualified to decide which research and literature on conflict is the most valuable to your own specific situations. And you are the ones who must take the final step of <u>applying</u> the research to the real world. I hope that what I've said here today has given you an idea of the scope of materials available on conflict. And I look forward to hearing from you directly about the conflicts that you encounter in your schools.

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